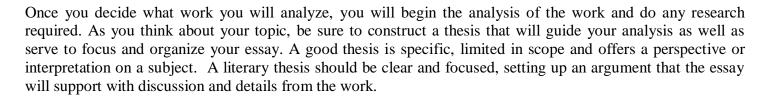# LITERARY ANALYSIS THESIS

A thesis in a literary analysis or literary research paper can take many forms. When given an assignment to analyze a work of fiction, poetry, or drama, you must first determine the requirements of the assignment. Make sure that you understand the nature of the assignment and that you follow the instructions of your professor.

**Useful Information:** Literature is classified in categories, or genres, which have sub-classifications or forms of their own. Being familiar with the characteristics of the genre in which the work is classified will provide context for your analysis of that work. In the list below, which is not exhaustive, are common forms of literature with the genres they represent.

- *Fiction*: myths, parables, short stories, novels (picaresque, romance, historical, gothic, science fiction, mystery, modernist)
- *Poetry*: sonnets, ballads, epics, limericks, elegies, free verse, odes, lyrics, tercets, villanelles
- *Drama*: tragedies, comedies, theatre of the absurd
- *Nonfiction* (sometimes called *creative nonfiction*): slave narratives, personal essays, memoirs, biographies, travel writing

Once you decide what work you will analyze, you will begin the analysis of the work and do any research required. As you think about your topic, be sure to construct a thesis that will guide your analysis as well as serve to focus and organize your essay. A good thesis is specific, limited in scope and offers a perspective or interpretation on a subject. A literary thesis should be clear and focused, setting up an argument that the essay will support with discussion and details from the work.

## SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENTS

These sample thesis statements are provided as guides, not as required forms or prescriptions.

**#1** **The thesis may focus on an analysis of one of the elements of fiction, drama, poetry or nonfiction as expressed in the work: character, plot, structure, idea, theme, symbol, style, imagery, tone, etc.**

*Example:*

In "A Worn Path," Eudora Welty creates a fictional character in Phoenix Jackson whose determination, faith, and cunning illustrate the indomitable human spirit.

Note that the work, author, and character to be analyzed are identified in this thesis statement. The thesis relies on a strong verb (*creates*). It also identifies the element of fiction that the writer will explore (*character*) and the characteristics the writer will analyze and discuss (*determination*, *faith*, *cunning*).

**Further Examples:**

The character of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* serves as a foil to young Juliet, delights us with her warmth and earthy wit, and helps realize the tragic catastrophe.

The works of ecstatic love poets Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir use symbols such as a lover's longing and the Tavern of Ruin to illustrate the human soul's desire to connect with God.

**#2    The thesis may focus on illustrating how a work reflects the particular genre's forms, the characteristics of a philosophy of literature, or the ideas of a particular school of thought.**

*Example:*

"The Third and Final Continent" exhibits characteristics recurrent in writings by immigrants: tradition, adaptation, and identity.

Note how the thesis statement classifies the form of the work (*writings by immigrants*) and identifies the characteristics of that form of writing (*tradition, adaptation, and identity*) that the essay will discuss.

**Further examples:**

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* reflects characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd in its minimalist stage setting, its seemingly meaningless dialogue, and its apocalyptic or nihilist vision.

A close look at many details in "The Story of an Hour" reveals how language, institutions, and expected demeanor suppress the natural desires and aspirations of women.


**#3    The thesis may draw parallels between some element in the work and real-life situations or subject matter: historical events, the author's life, medical diagnoses, etc.**

*Example:*

In Willa Cather's short story, "Paul's Case," Paul exhibits suicidal behavior that a caring adult might have recognized and remedied had that adult had the scientific knowledge we have today.

This thesis suggests that the essay will identify characteristics of suicide that Paul exhibits in the story. The writer will have to research medical and psychology texts to determine the typical characteristics of suicidal behavior and to illustrate how Paul's behavior mirrors those characteristics.

**Further Examples:**

Through the experience of one man, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, accurately depicts the historical record of slave life in its descriptions of the often brutal and quixotic relationship between master and slave and of the fragmentation of slave families.

In "I Stand Here Ironing," one can draw parallels between the narrator's situation and the author's life experiences as a mother, writer, and feminist.

# SAMPLE PATTERNS FOR THESES ON LITERARY WORKS

1.  In *(title of work)*, *(author) (illustrates, shows) (aspect) (adjective).*

    ***Example:***   In "Barn Burning," William Faulkner shows the characters Sardie and Abner Snopes struggling for their identity.

2.  In *(title of work)*, *(author)* uses *(one aspect)* to *(define, strengthen, illustrate)* the *(element of work).*

    ***Example:***   In "Youth," Joseph Conrad uses foreshadowing to strengthen the plot.

3.  In *(title of work)*, *(author)* uses *(an important part of work)* as a unifying device for *(one element), (another element),* and *(another element).* **NOTE:** The number of elements can vary from one to four.

    ***Example:***   In "Youth," Joseph Conrad uses the sea as a unifying device for setting, structure and theme.

4.  *(Author)* develops the character of *(character's name)* in *(literary work)* through what he/she does, what he/she says, what other people say to or about him/her.

    ***Example:***   Langston Hughes develops the character of Semple in "Ways and Means"…

5.  In *(title of work)*, *(author)* uses *(literary device)* to *(accomplish, develop, illustrate, strengthen) (element of work).*

    ***Example:***   In "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe uses the symbolism of the stranger, the clock, and the seventh room to develop the theme of death.

6.  *(Author) (shows, develops, illustrates)* the theme of _____ in the *(play, poem, story).*

    ***Example:***   Flannery O'Connor illustrates the theme of the effect of the selfishness of the grandmother upon the family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

7.  *(Author)* develops his character(s) in *(title of work)* through his/her use of language.

    ***Example:***   John Updike develops his characters in "A & P" through his use of figurative language.

# OTHER RESOURCES

- Refer to your literary textbook. The first chapter often includes information on writing essays on literary topics, and later chapters discuss elements of literature.

- Use supplemental resources available in the LTC. Consider the following:

  - ✓ McKeague, Pat. *Writing about Literature: Step by Step.* 8th ed. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co. 2005.

  - ✓ Roberts, Edgar V. Ed. *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing.* 4th Compact Ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2008.

- Refer to this very reputable online resource: The OWL (Online Writing Lab) at Purdue:

  - ✓ "Writing in Literature: An Overview": http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/713/01/
    This overview page includes links to pages that discuss how to write a thesis, how to read a poem, how to read a novel or short story, and how to read a play, among other topics.

- Ask an LTC tutor to review drafts of your thesis statement for strength and coherence.

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**FINAL NOTE:  Conventions for Writing a Literary Analysis Essay or Research Paper**

Ensure that your essay…

❑ makes an argument or claim or illustrates an engaging perspective on the work

❑ includes a thesis which lists the key points the essay will discuss

❑ provides evidence to support your claim

❑ refers to the author(s) and the work(s) in the opening sentences.  Use the author's full name the first time and the author's last name in all further references in the essay.

❑ uses literary present tense to discuss events in the fiction, poetry, or drama.
For information on this convention, see: http://humanities.ucsd.edu/writing/workshop/present.htm

❑ uses strong verbs in the thesis statement and throughout the essay: demonstrates, uses, develops, underscores, accomplishes, strengthens, illustrates, shows, reveals, serves, emphasizes, identifies, suggests, implies, etc.

❑ uses formal rather than informal language
For more information on levels of formality, visit our website:
http://www.gpc.edu/~gpcltc/handouts/levelsofformality.pdf

❑ does more than simply summarize the work
For more information on literary analysis, visit our website:
http://www.gpc.edu/~gpcltc/handouts/literaryanalysis.pdf